

Melancholia And Maternal Estrangement: A Comparative Study of Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*

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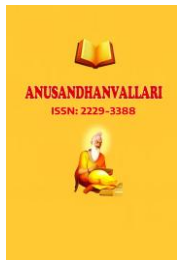
ABSTRACT

Both the male and female Black novelists emerged in the realm of American- African, Nigerian and Kenyan literatures in the recent times. They successfully occupied their unique place in the world literature and vitally contribute with considerable works for the growth of novel writing. This article is an earnest attempt to compare the themes of melancholia and maternal estrangement in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*. The article examines the relationship between fractured mother-daughter relationships and female subjectivity in the contexts of African American and postcolonial Nigeria. Alice Walker describes maternal ambivalence as being bound up with political activism, racial struggle, and the psychological weight of revolutionary commitment in *Meridian*. In the book *Night Dancer*, Chika Unigwe embodies the concept of maternal absence in silence, secrecy, and social stigma, as an indication of the way patriarchy and moral policing breaks intimate relationships. This paper relies on psychoanalytic feminism and trauma theory to explain that melancholia in the two works is not always a result of individual loss but rather a set of historically determined relations of gendered oppression. By contextualizing maternal estrangement in the wider context of a socio-political reality, it is argued in the paper that Walker and Unigwe redefine the motherhood as a battleground of pain and resistance along with identity negotiation instead of sentimental idealization.

Keywords: Melancholic, Maternal Estrangement, Feminine Psychology, An Unending-Trauma

Introduction: The role of motherhood has often been depicted in the literary and cultural traditions as divine, unselfish, and emotionally redeeming. In patriarchal discourse, the identity of a mother is likely to be viewed as instinct and something that is naturally satisfying, as the ultimate expression of womanhood. Nevertheless, feminist fiction of today makes this feminization more complicated by exposing the tensions, ambivalences, and psychic rifts embedded in maternal experience. Motherhood in *Meridian* by Alice Walker and *Night Dancer* by Chika Unigwe is not depicted as a smooth ground of devotion but rather of a historically and emotionally rich field strained by the racial, political, and patriarchal forces. In spite of the fact that these novels are the product of different socio-political situations in Civil Rights-era America and postcolonial Nigeria, they overlap in their depiction of maternal alienation due to structural oppression.

Key Theme: The maternal body in Walker's novel *Meridian* (1976) is placed in the storm of the American Civil Rights Movement where the individual decisions cannot be separated as they are combined with the group of struggles. The romanticized story of sacrificial motherhood is shaken by the decision of Meridian Hill to give up her child. Her retreat is not the act of cruelty but denying the biological reproductive act to the political or spiritual one. Walker contextualizes this rejection in an even larger critique of historical oppressions done on Black women whose bodies have been long objects of labor, exploitation, and compelled nurturing. The



physical weakness of the protagonist, her frequent fainting, and physical exhaustion, are symbolic signs of the psychosomatic strain of having to live in incompatible demands: activist, daughter, lover, mother. Here, motherhood also stands out as one more place where the Black female subjectivity is surveilled and disciplined.

On the same note, in *Night Dancer* (2012) by Unigwe, motherhood is understated against a backdrop of the ethical austerities of the postcolonial Nigerian society. Ezi is a single mother and she lives in a cultural environment where feminine decency is strictly controlled. She does not say anything about the paternity of her daughter, which is protective and foreign. The story that the daughter tells following the death of Ezi shows how silence has been a survival tactic in a society that marginalizes women who break the normative marriage patterns. The estrangement of the mother that Unigwe represents is therefore somewhat not due to lack of emotion, but that of social disapproval. The alienation of the mother is determined by the fear of shame, ostracism, and economic insecurity.

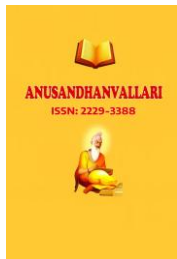
Both novels interrogate the myth of maternal instinct by foregrounding ambivalence as a legitimate emotional state. Feminist theorists such as Adrienne Rich have argued that motherhood must be understood as an institution distinct from the lived experience of mothering. Walker and Unigwe dramatize this distinction by showing how institutionalized motherhood policies women's choices, while lived maternal experience is fragmented by doubt, guilt, and resistance. In *Meridian*, the generational conflict between Meridian and her own mother exposes how internalized patriarchal ideology perpetuates maternal expectations. In *Night Dancer*, the daughter's retrospective understanding reveals how social silence fractures intimacy across generations.

Furthermore, maternal estrangement, in both texts, is placed in historic memory. According to Walker, personal ambivalence is connected to collective trauma based, which is rooted in slavery and racial violence, and the weight of the past affects the current maternal subjectivity. Unigwe, however, places estrangement in the surrounding of colonialism, immigration, and economic insecurities in Nigeria. Even though the settings of the two narratives are geographically apart, both of them portray motherhood as a location where the account of the public meets the account of personal loss. The maternal body does not only bear children but is also carrying inherited wounds.

Melancholia, thematically, serves as a connecting point between the novels. Instead of showing the loss by expressing it openly, both authors describe the sorrow as internalized and the sorrow remains within the daily encounters. This sorrowful sub-plot makes traditional ideas of maternal redemption difficult. The mothers in these readings are not able to go through cathartic reconciliation; their identities are still not tension-free. However, in this contradiction is a radical reworking of maternal agency. Rejecting complete adherence to social dictates, *Meridian* and Ezi claim an unassertive, yet, important control over their stories.

In this way, Walker and Unigwe deviate from the discussion of feminist literature by questioning the sanctification of motherhood. Their writings believe that motherly love can exist with fatigue, skepticism and even withdrawal. The symptom of structural violence in these novels is estrangement rather than the lack of love. Through foregrounding ambivalence, as well as silence, both authors reestablish the maternal subjectivity of mythologized ideals and redefine it in concrete lived socio-political circumstances. Alice Walker, a renowned African American novelist, poet, and activist, was born in 1944 in Georgia, the United States, and all of her literary works revolve around Black women experiences, racial injustices, and spiritual survival. Having been strongly affected by the Civil Rights Movement, in his fiction, Walker has always questioned the intersection of race, gender, and political resistance. Published in 1976, her novel *Meridian* is the result of her involvement with the plight of African American communities in the Civil Rights movement and the psychological balance of activism on the lives of Black women.

Chika Unigwe was born in 1974 in Nigeria and subsequently relocated to Belgium and the United States, she is a modern Nigerian novelist based in Belgium and the United States whose novels discuss the themes of migration, sexuality, memory and social stigma. *Night Dancer* (2012) holds its setting in Nigeria and questions the standards of morality that govern female sexuality and motherhood in the postcolonial society.



Although Walker presents the story within the African American historical trauma context, and Unigwe within the Nigerian patriarchal culture context, both authors predict the instability and indecisiveness of maternal relationships.

According to the theoretical prism of melancholia, as presented by Sigmund Freud and subsequently built upon by Julia Kristeva, both texts demonstrate that the broken maternal bonds are corresponding to the innerized socio-historical violence instead of moral victimization. Freud in mourning and melancholy differentiates between normal mourning and melancholy, and claims that melancholy ensues when loss is internalized and the subject identifies himself with the object that has been lost causing him to turn his aggression into himself (Freud 249). He also notes that the shadow of the object was cast on the ego (249) implying that unresolved loss gets internalized in the self. In contrast to mourning, which fades away over time, melancholy is a persistent sense of self-reproach and low self-esteem.

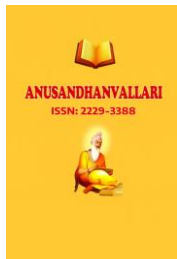
The black son, Kristeva goes farther and suggests that melancholia is associated with the disturbances in maternal attachment and symbolic meaning. To Kristeva, the maternal connection is the basis of subjectivity; when broken, it creates instability and muteness. These theoretical approaches cut across the emotional terrains of *Meridian* Hill and Ezi whose maternal estrangements are influenced by political activism, racial history, and sexual stigma. Maternal ambivalence is a phenomenon that crops up in *Meridian* in conjunction with political awakening. When she is still in the process of establishing a coherent sense of self, *Meridian* is already married and pregnant. Motherhood is not shown as the happy completion but the imprisonment in the anticipations that she has not actively decided on.

Considering her abandonment of her son, the story says, “She felt as if something had been cut away from her, and yet she could breathe” (19). Such paradox sums up melancholia: loss and liberation concurrently. *Meridian* is relieved of the choking pressures of domesticity at the same time she internalizes guilt. The fact that Freud argues that in melancholy, the person blames himself or herself becomes clear when *Meridian* feels like she is inadequate (21).

This estrangement is aggravated by the generational conflict between *Meridian* and her mother. Her mother is a traditional religious woman and identifies motherhood with the purpose of the Almighty. When *Meridian* gives birth, her mother disowns her and says, “You have thrown away the one gift God gives a woman” (22). This accusation shows how religious ideology supports the constructions of femininity as being patriarchal. Motherhood turns into a religious duty, the failure of which indicates moral insufficiency. This condemnation is absorbed by *Meridian* and her body indicates the strain. Walker writes, “Her body seemed unable to bear the weight of her thoughts” (22). Physical weakness is a manifestation of psychic struggle, which implies the psychosomatic aspect of melancholy.

The repetitive fainting of *Meridian* is a symbolic representation of the weight of negotiating racial activism and gender expectation at the same time. At one time, the narrator comments, “She had failed at being what everyone expected” (25). This is an internalized feeling of failure and this is consistent with Freud who points out that the melancholy subject shifts the aggression to the self (Freud 252). But it is all set in the context of the history of racial oppression that Walker locates this self-doubt. “The past pressed against the present,” the narrative asserts, emphasizing how ancestral suffering intrudes upon contemporary consciousness (25). The activism of *Meridian* is informed by the trauma of slavery; she bears the memory of slavery and segregation of people. In this kind of a setting, motherhood is one of the numerous responsibilities that vie against one another, both emotionally and politically.

In contrast to some of the sentimental images of maternal sacrifice, Walker presents motherhood as a historically-determined condition. *Meridian* has not alienated her son emotionally but rather a reaction to her limited agency. She develops melancholy due to the fact that she cannot bring her revolution and domestic ideology together in a society where people are oppressed by race. Motherhood is politicized and the burden of racial past and male authority is transferred to the woman body. Conversely, *Night Dancer* builds maternal



alienation by means of silence and not physical distance. Ezi continues to live in the life of her daughter but refuses to give necessary details of her past life, especially the father of her daughter. The daughter recalls, “There were questions you learned not to ask” (25). The home is ruled by silence which influences the emotional distance.

The estrangement of Ezi is not as blatant as that of Meridian, but is quite pervasive. This silence is made more difficult by the Nigerian context. Unmarried mothers are social outcasts that bring about a sense of suspicion. As one-character remarks, “A woman alone is always suspect” (25). This crude declaration is the summary of patriarchal surveillance and moral policing. The hiding of her past is safeguarding behavior by Ezi against societal criticism. But the price of being safe is disintegration. The daughter reflects, “My mother carried her secrets like scars” (26). The image of scars implies the presence of survival and harm, the wounds that are covered but not healed.

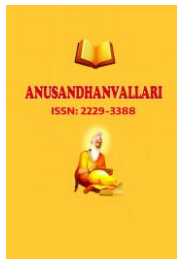
First, the daughter sees the secrecy of her mother as the cynicism of emotions, which she feels frustrated and desires to understand. But, through the retrospective narration, it can be reinterpreted. And she finally admits, “In knowing her story, I began to understand” (28). This late realization echoes the claims made by the theory of trauma which hold that suffering can only be made intelligible by reconstruction. Learning does not eliminate alienation but redefines it. Kristeva’s insight that melancholia disrupts language is particularly relevant here (28). The lack of speech on Ezi speaks of a crisis of articulation. Tongues might lead to her disgrace; silence is a way of maintaining a proud but distant personality.

Therefore, maternal estrangement in the film *Night Dancer* is made out to be a form of protection that is paradoxical. The structural parallels are seen through the comparative view. In *Meridian*, racial activism and religious patriarchy are the causes of estrangement, in *Night Dancer* sexual stigmatization and community policing. Meridian gives up her child in search of liberation; Ezi denies the truth to protect her child against stigma. The judgment of the society is internalized by both of the women. The guilt of Meridian and the guarded withdrawal of Ezi can be compared to the description of diminished self-regard in melancholia (28). The form of narration supports melancholy in both novels. The episodic nature of the structure as exhibited by Walker reflects the disjointed conscientiousness of Meridian. The nonlinear story of Unigwe is built upon the hidden history that is constructed bit by bit in accordance with the emotional awakening of the daughter. Division of body indicates division of maternal relationships.

The interruption of memory, political experiences and intimate thoughts create an interruption rhythm in *Meridian*. There is no chronological flow of scenes: everything is a fragment of experience that does not refuse to be closed by the narration. This disintegration of the structure is similar to the psychic condition of Meridian Hill. Her mind switches between the past and the present, between activism and illness, between the memory of the past, which is inherited, and the present suffering. The narrative voice tends to shrink back out of the traditional exposition, giving condensed instances of interiority. This institutional inhibition causes the suspension of emotion to increase. Melancholia, in this case, is not only a thematic, but an architectural thing: it determines the way in which the story is narrated. The reader does not find a conflict of the maternal ambivalence of Meridian as resolved but as a repeated pulse, which appears in an unpredictable manner, just like repressed grief.

The silence in dialogue used by Walker also adds to this effect. Discussions are often aborted before the emotional tensions are resolved. This lack of direct challenge between Meridian and her mother when it comes to reproductive expectations is made as significant as verbal blame. The holes in the story come as zones of unuttered grief. In these silences, Walker is hinting that it is possible to perpetuate maternal estrangement not as much by dramatic rupture but by omissions over time. The fragmented nature of memory so transmitted across generations, between black women, is reflected in the episodic form.

The absence is also prefigured in *Night Dancer*, where Unigwe presents absence with the help of the nonlinear narrative strategy. The voice of the daughter is a rebuilding of the life of her mother Ezi



retrospectively, in the form of fragments of the letters, memories, and late understanding. The movement between the past and the present brings about gradual revelation instead of revelation. Such gradual excavation is a reflection of a psychological working through of the repressed knowledge. In both stories, every change of narrative reveals the new facet of maternal vulnerability, forcing the reader to feel like being in an evolving perception, not a state. Emotional enlightenment of the daughter goes hand in hand with the structural revelations in the story.

Unigwe also uses the changes of perspective and time as elements to emphasize the unreliability of memory. Some episodes are rewoven in the light of new knowledge and this proves that interpretation is modified when there is more contextual knowledge. Such re-enactment of the story correlates with the daughter changing her resentment and turning into empathy. The nonlinear structure is therefore an ethical tool, as it calls the reader to suspend judgment, and to be aware of how secrecy and silence is a survival strategy. This delayed understanding is the melancholy contained within *Night Dancer*: grief is not just due to loss but also to the understanding of the little one knew during the lifetime of the mother.

Conclusion: In both novels, the fragmentation is opposing the redemptive cycle that is characteristic of conventional maternal narratives. There is no smooth being reconciled that restores harmony. Rather, the narrative forms are tense, and ambiguity and emotional complexity are preserved. Form and content merge to portray motherhood as a negotiable place. The fragmented narrative reflects the fragmented relationships between mother and daughter and makes the point that estrangement is not a single event but a condition that persists due to the influence of memory, silence and historic burden. Both novels are not fully reconcilable. Meridian does not reconcile with her son and does not completely get rid of guilt. Ezi has a daughter who is enlightened but it is impossible to erase years of silence. According to Freud, melancholy is not easy to close (Freud 253) and that is the same thing that happens in both stories through this resistance. But the tension which is not resolved is critical awareness. Both texts challenge unrealistic expectations on mothers by dealing with estrangement.

Eventually, by making motherhood historically and culturally constructed, Walker and Unigwe deconstruct sentimental myths of motherhood. Through images of something “cut away” (89), and the assertion that “A woman alone is always suspect” (32), Both novels are an exposition of the socio-political conditions of maternal identity. Estrangement does not appear as individual incompleteness but rather, as structural result. Melancholia becomes injured and conscience that sheds light on the psychological price of having to maneuver through oppressive systems. By reinventing motherhood as a contentious space and not an idealized zone, these writers form a part of a transnational feminist discourse that embraces the ambivalence, silence and resistance as part of the lived experiences of women.

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